

# OUR MODE OF BAPTISM

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## ITS BASIS AND VALIDITY

THE SOLIDARITY and continuing identity of any denominational group depends upon a certain existing measure of unity in faith and practice as well as in spirit. Indeed, the experience of denominations indicates that the two are mutually interdependent. When certain persons, churches, or church areas make marked departures from the historic or generally accepted patterns, the situation becomes varied and dissimilar in emphasis and practice, and tends toward eventual dividedness in attitude. Between strict regimentation on one hand and open laxity on the other, some way needs to be found to foster a proper measure of unity in these essential respects as a matter of good denominational house-keeping.

Formerly the Committee on Doctrine and Conduct of the General Conference Mennonite Church directed its efforts and thought toward this end. Yet the need for such effort and thought continues, that as a group we may be more truly "of one heart and of one soul" (Acts 4:32). Since the area of concern and endeavor of the Committee on the Ministry has much to do with the faith, life, and work of the church, the Conference executive encouraged this committee, in addition to its other functions, to endeavor to be helpful to the leaders of our churches in matters pertaining to our common faith and practice.

The committee took the proposal under consideration and decided as an initial gesture in this direction to call attention to our historic mode of baptism—its form, basis, validity, etc.

### *The Mode*

In general, the rite of baptism is administered by one of two means, immersion or effusion. As practiced among the various churches, each of these has its own peculiar variations. Immersion is sometimes forward and sometimes backward; sometimes once, sometimes thrice. Effusion is either by sprinkling or by pouring. Historically the position and practice of Mennonitism, by and large, has been baptism by pouring, as is the case in our own General Conference. In some instances the water is poured from a vessel into the hands of the one administering the rite and applied by him to the head of the applicant. In others, the minister cups his hands to lift a quantity of water from the vessel and pours it upon the head of the applicant. In either case, the water is poured, rather than sprinkled by the fingertips or the applicant submerged in it.

By what means were our founding fathers led to adopt this practice in the matter of baptism? Of what scriptural basis has its practice been predicated, accepted, and practiced among us? Is such basis sufficient to establish it as a valid and adequate mode of baptism? What is the testimony of those who with honest, seeking hearts have so received it? These are some of the questions which the committee felt should properly be raised and answers given.

### *Scriptural Basis*

Both pouring and sprinkling were prescribed and accepted forms by which the scriptural transactions of cleansing and spiritual endowment were symbolized in the Old Testament. "These were performed by applications of oil, water or blood. 'And he poured of the anointing oil upon Aaron's head' (Lev. 8:12). Also the Levites: 'And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Take the Levites from among the children of Israel and cleanse them. . . Sprinkle water of purifying upon the head of him that is to be cleansed' (Lev. 14:8). For uncleanness: 'The water of separation hath not been sprinkled upon him, he is unclean' (Num. 19:20). There were many instances of purifying by pouring or sprinkling, which did not wash the surface of the body but which ceremonially cleansed the entire being.

The terms also appear in prophetic utterances. "I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed" (Isa. 44:3). "Then will I sprinkle clean water



upon you and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols, will I cleanse you" (Ezek. 36:25). And again, "And it shall come to pass that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh . . . in those days will I pour out my Spirit" (Joel 2:28, 29).

As we move into the New Testament, is there any adequate ground to believe that the early New Testament leaders with their Jewish background would make any immediate and radical departure from the thought, forms, and practices with which both they and the people were familiar? Indeed, "many prophecies said that He that should come would pour, sprinkle and purify; and the Jews who for over a thousand years had known this way of purification—to pour or sprinkle some liquid on the person or object to be purified—could readily see (and understand) the symbol of water baptism" (administered in the same way).

Further, "we know that John applied the water to the people for he said, 'I baptize you with water' (Matt. 3:11). The water, not the people, was handled. He baptized with water. Jesus himself said, 'John truly baptized with water' (Acts 1:5). Nothing could be stronger, for Jesus said he truly did. John handled the water in some way and applied it to the individual. To have dipped the individual into the water would have been to do something to the water with the individual."

Moreover, "the only washing ever enjoined by Scripture upon believers and performed by an official administrator was done by sprinkling or pouring. . . . There is no Scripture to show the applicants were taken any distance for baptism. When Peter and a number of converts were together in the house of Cornelius, water was the only thing lacking for baptism. Peter said, 'Can any forbid water, that these should not be baptized?' not 'forbid that these go to the water.' Consider also the baptism of the Philippian jailor and his household. Nowhere in Scripture did any preacher and convert leave a place of worship and go out in search of water.

"Any small quantity of water may signify cleansing. In the absence of any instruction by Moses, John the Baptist, or Christ, or the apostles as to the quantity to be used in baptism, the Church leaves this to the discretion of the administrator. The mode is usually termed 'baptism by pouring.' Since the baptism of the Holy Ghost, whenever mentioned, is mentioned in connection

with pouring, it is but natural to conclude that baptism by water should be by the same mode."

### *The Mode in History*

"There was little written on the subject of baptism immediately after the apostolic time, for it was well understood. For some time information could easily be acquired from aged Christians who had witnessed the apostolic ceremonies. The few early accounts of baptism show effusion as the mode. Eusebius, the 'father of church history,' says that the Apostle John reclaimed a fallen disciple who wept with tears of penitence, as if baptized a second time 'with his own tears.' The flowing of tears was like a baptism . . . Irenaeus used the falling of the rain and 'pouring of water on dry wheat flour' as types of water baptism. 'Origen, the most learned man of his day, whose father and grandfather were Christians (the latter contemporary with the apostles), comments on the transactions at Mt. Carmel when Elijah poured water on the altar, and describes it by 'baptizo'; also certifying that John the Baptist did the same thing. . . . In the third century, Laurentius, a Roman deacon, was brought to the stake to suffer martyrdom, when one of the soldiers was so impressed that he professed conversion and desired to be baptized on the spot. A pitcher of water was brought and the soldier was baptized by the martyr at the place of execution. . . . The oldest known picture of baptism in the world, made in the Roman catacombs early in the second century, represents John baptizing Jesus with water. John stands on the bank of the Jordan and Jesus at the edge of the water. Baptism by dipping water on the head with one hand seems just completed, and John is bending slightly forward with his hand at the elbow of Christ to help Him out of the water. This picture was made by the early Christians, shortly after the death of the Apostle John."

### *In the Writing of Menno Simons*

"Menno Simons wrote extensively in favor of baptism on confession of faith and against infant baptism. The manner of the ceremony received but little discussion at that time. Menno rightly dwelt upon inward graces rather than outward forms. . . ." That he believed in effusion is evident from at least two passages in his writings as translated by Prof. Osgood of Roch-



ester Theological Seminary (Baptist), viz., "I think that these and similar commands are more painful and difficult to preserve flesh, which is so prone to follow its own way, than to receive a handful of water. How any one who is so unbelieving and rebellious that he refuses God, a handful of water can conform himself to love his enemies . . . I will leave the serious reader to reflect upon in the fear of God."

### *In Experience*

Applying the test of experience, there is abundant evidence in the experience of believers that baptism by pouring is a valid and God-accepted form of Christian baptism. How many of those who have gone before us, both in our own church and in others, who were thus baptized, received the grace of God and had the witness borne to their spirits by His Spirit that they were His! Years ago in one of our church communities in Indiana a devout and faithful member of the church lay lingering at death's door. As the family physician sat watching at her bedside, she calmly asked him, "Doctor, do you think I will live two weeks?" He replied, "No, Mary." "Will I live two days?" "I don't think so." "Will I live two hours?" "I doubt it." She slowly turned her eyes and looked out at the western sky to where the late afternoon sun was moving toward the horizon, and then broke out triumphantly, "Then thank the Lord, before the sun goes down, I may be with Him." Could anyone ask for more peace, more assurance of divine acceptance, more radiant expectancy than that? Yet her case has been duplicated over and over through the generations in the experience of others who, baptized in similar manner, have preceded or followed her.

In the light of such evidence of divine acceptance and approval of persons who received baptism by means of pouring, do we not all find ourselves in the position of Peter in the house of Cornelius, who in the face of divine approbation said, "What was I, that I could withstand God?"

### *Our Attitude Toward Mode*

This, then, is our mode in which we believe and which we practice. Our fathers believed in it, found it adequate and valid, and commended it to us. The Scriptures, moreover, afford ample basis for and justification of it, and God himself has approved it in the

experience of His saints. We should accordingly espouse it with conviction, and urge it without apology on those who appear before us as candidates for baptism.

But we are not narrow protagonists in the matter of mode. We do not go so far as to deny validity in any other mode and thereby declare unchristian those who have been baptized in some other way. We believe in our mode and in the foundations on which it rests, and leave with them and their own conscience the matter of their belief and the basis for it. If they can testify that God has accepted them, we accept their testimony, even as we hope that they will accept ours. Nor have we generally refused to use some other mode in certain special cases where it seemed justifiable to do so.

But within our own household of faith, we should uphold and not readily depart from the general and historically established practice of Mennonitism in this respect. We should uphold it with firmness and yet with consideration. Whenever there is any deviation therefrom, it should be known and understood that it is by way of concession, as mentioned above, and should not be construed as a trend away from our historic and accepted practice, so that honest souls who for years have trusted to and felt that grace of God upon them, do not become disturbed lest they had been left in error on this point.

Certainly it is the appointed role of us as shepherds of the flock to work for unity and solidarity in our denomination, our Conference, and our respective charges. Faithful advocacy of, and steady adherence to, our historic and established mode of baptism is one way in which we may all contribute to that desired end.

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